

Knapp proposes new county budget office “free of political ties”

Other council members oppose additional level of bureaucracy

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Creating a new budget office within Montgomery County could provide the county council with independent research and analysis on how to prepare the budget for fiscal year 2012, according to Councilman Mike Knapp (D-Dist. 2) who submitted a bill at Tuesday’s meeting to do just that. Following a series of recent cost projections for the 2012 budget from County Executive Isiah “Ike Leggett (D), Knapp said the council could use a set of projections free of political ties.

“Budgets are political documents, and we don’t want to rely completely on what other folks say to be true,” said Knapp, who is the only member of council who has chosen not to run for re-election. “And we don’t really have a lot of money right now.”

Though the move would be unusual, as most county councils in the area rely on the executive office for budget advice, the separate department could reduce friction between the council and Leggett in upcoming budget sessions. The council recently argued with Leggett over a plan he submitted to furlough county employees in another move to save money. The council countered that the loss in productivity could cost taxpayers as much as \$7 million in one year.

“There have been issues of reliability and the creditability of some of the fiscal impact statements sent over by the executive,” Councilman Phil Andrews (D-Dist. 3) said. Council members chimed in that a recent report from Leggett’s office lacked major financial details.

But not all members of the council were convinced that Knapp’s proposal is the answer.

“At a time when we’re talking about shrinking everything in county government, I don’t see how we can justify creating another office,” Councilman Marc Elrich (D-At large) said. Elrich suggested simply reassigning staff to do a budget analysis could function the same way.

Council members were able to agree on one leafy issue: adding vegetable gardens at county public schools that could be used for environmental education and even be included in school lunches. Council members first determined if there was any ban on growing food on school grounds and what the costs could be.

In an open letter from February of this year, Superintendent of Schools Jerry Weast outlined the problems having a vegetable garden on school grounds poses. He added in

that letter that there are only two gardens allowed at schools: flower gardens and butterfly gardens. Montgomery County Public Schools Assistant Director of Facilities Management Sean Gallagher assured council members that there was no ban on vegetable gardens but that keeping up the projects could be a great undertaking.

“Maintenance staff will be the ones who will be putting in more time,” Gallagher said. He added that dealing with local animals like woodchucks could become a taxing task for schools. But council members were not deterred and began discussing excitedly the prospect of offering county students locally grown lunches. Councilman George Leventhal (D-At large) even discussed his personal recipe for beefsteak tomatoes.

“I firmly believe we can offer kids healthy meals that are colorful and appetizing and desirable,” Leventhal said.